

Summer, 2005

Dear Neighbor,

I am taking this opportunity to tell you about some issues taken up by the General Assembly during the 2005 session. The legislature began its work on January 5th, and the regular session ended, as directed by the state constitution, on June 8. There have been two short special sessions.

I was sworn in for my third term as state representative for the 36th district on opening day in January. I was appointed vice-chair of the Judiciary Committee, returned for another term on the Government Administrations and Elections Committee and was also appointed to serve on the Environment Committee.

There was new leadership at the Capitol this year, and the change was welcome. Of course, there was a new governor, M. Jodi Rell, who succeeded Gov. Rowland when he resigned last year. There was also a new Lieutenant Governor, Kevin Sullivan, a new speaker of the house, James Amann, and a new president pro tem of the senate, Donald Williams. The Governor and new leadership team set a fresh, positive tone in Hartford. I was pleased that certain issues that are important to our district and state, such as environmental protection, government accountability and campaign finance reform, were pursued with new vigor.

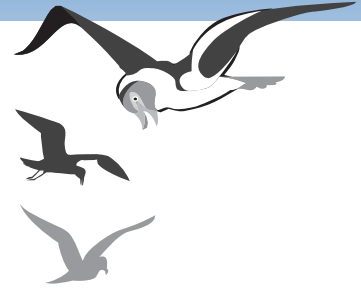
As in any session, there were disappointments. Little progress was made on overhauling our outdated property tax system. Not enough progress was made in the areas of health care access and prescription drug prices. While both houses passed campaign reform bills, lack of agreement on a final bill resulted in a stalemate. I will continue to work on these and other vital issues in the months ahead and when the next session begins in February 2006.

I greatly appreciate your letters, e-mails and telephone calls in which you share your concerns about legislation. It is an honor to represent our unique part of the state in Hartford.

Sincerely,



James F. Spallone,
State Representative, 36th District



THE STATE BUDGET

At the beginning of the legislative session, the budget picture was disconcerting. A budget deficit for the coming fiscal year of between \$650 million and \$1 billion was anticipated. A surplus for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2005, however, was also projected.

An improving state economy and healthy tax revenue in April resulted in a shrinking deficit. This brightening outlook led to a budget passed in June and signed by Governor Rell that avoided income or sales tax increases and cuts to important programs or municipal aid.

Our towns received increases in municipal aid, including increases in Educational Cost Sharing (ECS) grants to help pay for local education and significant increases in Town Aid Road (TAR) grants. While these funds cannot completely prevent local property tax increases, they do assist our towns in meeting their expenses and holding the line on tax hikes.

The budget also included \$20 million in each fiscal year for the Small Town Economic Assistance Program (STEAP). This program, which I worked to create and have supported since its inception, provides grants of up to \$500,000 to small towns like ours to help pay for capital projects like street improvements, parks and recreational fields.

The budget did include a repeal of the state succession tax (which was being phased out) and the institution of a new, unified estate and gift tax that applies to estates with a value of \$2,000,000 or more at the time of death. Our estate tax was "decoupled" from the federal estate tax, which is being phased out. A surcharge on the corporate tax was extended.

It was disappointing that the budget does not address the ongoing problem of the local property tax, how it affects seniors and those on fixed incomes and how it can dictate local land use choices in an effort to grow the tax base. I will continue to work on that issue; real change will require building a new political consensus.

HEALTH CARE

A bill permitting and funding **embryonic stem-cell research** was passed and signed by the Governor. The bill makes a 10-year, \$100 million commitment to this promising area of medical research. There is great hope for progress in finding treatments for a number of debilitating diseases through stem-cell research. Public Act 05-149.

In a previous session, I supported legislation that permitted small businesses to buy into the state-backed municipal employee health insurance program (MEHIP). A bill approved this year builds on and improves that law by making important technical changes to help the Comptroller implement the program. In the absence of comprehensive health care reform being enacted at the national level, it is important for our state government to do what it can to make health care as accessible and affordable as possible. Public Act 05-238

A bill establishing an **organ and tissue database** to help establish appropriate matches of donors and recipients became law. Public Act 05-121

Public Act 05-122 requires restaurants to have a staff member trained regarding **food allergies** who can answer customer questions. To persons with food allergies, knowing what is in their meal is very important, and awareness of food allergies and intolerances is growing.

A bill requiring **electronic prescriptions**, and authorizing **electronic medical records**, was approved. This will increase accuracy and patient safety. Public Act 05-168.

Breast cancer screening by ultrasound, recommended by a doctor, will have to be covered by health insurance policies under Public Act 05-69. **Infertility treatments** will also be covered by insurance, within certain limits, under Public Act 05-196.

I have long supported **prescription drug purchasing pools** and other concepts to reduce the price of prescription drugs. The costs of these drugs can be devastating to seniors and others on limited incomes. While legislation directly addressing the problem was not passed this year, a task force, established by Public Act 05-280, will be studying the feasibility of a purchasing pool or importation of less expensive drugs from Canada. The report is due by January 1, 2006, in time for the next legislative session.



ELECTIONS AND ETHICS REFORM

As an active member of the Government Administration and Elections Committee, I was pleased with the progress we made this year. More work remains.

Two bills were enacted to improve and protect the **integrity of the election process**. Public Act 05-188 contains a key provision requiring that new electronic voting machines create a **voter-verifiable paper trail**. This will allow voters to confirm votes cast electronically and allow for accurate, paper-based recounts when needed. This bill also contained two sections that I authored: (1) an on-line **voter guide** for state elections, a project I have been working on for several sessions. The guide, which the Secretary of the State will begin to produce next year, will contain basic information about voting, offices up for election, districts, ballot questions and candidates for office, and (2) a "**stand by your ad provision**." In radio, television and Internet political ads, candidates will have to personally state that they approved any message. I believe it is important for candidates take personal responsibility for the ads they run during a campaign. This was required for federal campaigns, and will now be required for state campaigns.

Another bill, Public Act 05-235, will help prevent absentee voting fraud and allow voters to register up to a week before the election rather than two weeks.

I worked on **campaign finance reform** throughout the session, as I have in past years. We came very close to sweeping reform at the end of the session. Bills that would provide for public financing of elections, removing lobbyist, contractor and special interest dollars from the process, were passed by both the House and Senate on the last session day. There was a huge breakthrough when Governor Reil, during the last week of the session, publicly endorsed public financing of campaigns. The two houses and the Governor could not agree on when to begin the program and how to phase out the current system. At the time of this writing, a legislative task force is working with the Governor's office to come up with a compromise. A special session might be held to take up this issue.

The **state ethics commission** was reconstituted and reformed to make it more effective. The state contracting process was reformed to help prevent corrupt practices, and the whistleblower law was strengthened. Public Act 05-183. However, Governor Reil vetoed the more sweeping contracting reform bill, Public Act 05-286, which would have established a new Contracting Standards Board and procurement code. The bill contained a limited ban on new privatization contracts while standards are adopted. Governor Reil, in vetoing the bill, said that the privatization part of the bill went too far. I have been concerned for some time that there are no benchmarks, such as a cost-benefit analysis, to help determine the pros and cons of any proposed privatization.

PRESERVING FARMLAND AND OPEN SPACE; PLANNING FOR SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

A visionary and far-reaching piece of legislation that I was proud to cosponsor this year was Public Act 05-228, “An Act Concerning Farm Land Preservation, Land Protection, Affordable Housing and Historic Preservation.” Connecticut is losing farmland and open space at an alarming rate. While we have good programs in place to encourage preservation of these lands, lack of a reliable funding stream has been a challenge. This bill raises money through a special \$30 fee on documents recorded on the land records. The funds will be used to preserve farmland by purchase of development rights, open space purchases, affordable housing development and historic preservation projects. A small amount will go to the towns for capital improvement programs.



Throughout the session, I worked on a bill (HB 6393) to give towns the ability to raise money on their own for open space, farmland preservation, brownfield remediation and affordable housing, through a small local option transfer tax, so that they can be partners with the state on these important projects. This bill had wide support among municipal leaders and environmental advocates. I was pleased that the bill was approved by the Environment Committee and Planning and Development Committee; however, it did not make it to the floor. I will continue working on this concept.

This year, the legislature finally adopted a smart growth bill. I have been a strong supporter and cosponsor of these measures. The bill encourages consistency between state, regional and local plans of conservation and development. It encourages development along existing infrastructure and transportation lines.

THE CONNECTICUT RIVER AND BOATING

A bill I proposed with Rep. Marilyn Giuliano of neighboring Old Saybrook, aimed at **reducing excessive motorboat noise**, was signed into law in July. The bill increases the fine for refusing to submit to a motorboat noise test. Under the old law, if a boater refused the test, he would be subject to a fine that was less than if he took the test and failed. This new law, which went into effect July 1, removes the incentive to skip the test. We hope this will result in better compliance with noise regulations. Public Act 05-203.

I also proposed a bill to designate certain areas of the lower river “areas of natural or historic interest,” where there would be stepped-up enforcement of wake, speed and noise laws. There was a good response at a public hearing. While the bill was not approved this year, I will be submitting a similar bill in the next session.

“An Act Concerning Boating Safety,” Public Act 05-133, will help conservation and law enforcement officers make our waterways safer. The bill provides penalties for failure to stop when signaled by an officer, and provides for the suspension or revocation of a safe boating certificate if a boater violates certain safe boating laws. As our waterways become ever more popular, it is important to ensure everyone’s safety. Unfortunately, the Department of Environmental Protection’s enforcement division is understaffed and under-funded. I will be working with a coalition of legislators to improve this situation.

PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC LANDS

Connecticut is built upon its reputation as a state that takes environmental stewardship seriously. As a member of the Environment Committee, from a district with a remarkable variety of land and aquatic ecosystems, I was pleased to work on a number of key initiatives, including:

- **Trespass, Littering and Vandalism on Public Lands.** Public Act 05-234. Our parks and recreational areas belong to all of us, and are a precious resource. There has been a recent increase in damage to these places. I wrote and managed a bill to address this problem that increases the fines assessed for these crimes through a surcharge, and distributes the surcharge to the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) if a conservation officer makes the arrest, or the town where the arrest occurred if the state or local police make the arrest. This bill will help discourage damage to our parks, but also provide the DEP and our communities with additional funds for enforcement.
- **Clean Car Incentive Program.** Special Act 05-6. This bill stems from the climate change bill approved last year. It convenes a task force to develop new sales tax policies designed to encourage purchase of fuel-efficient vehicles, thus reducing pollution and emission of green house gasses.
- **Bi-State Long Island Sound Committee.** Public Act 05-137. With increasing interest among energy companies in building pipelines and even gas terminals on and under the Sound, this bill provides a way for New York and Connecticut leaders to coordinate their efforts protecting Long Island Sound from projects that could harm the environment or endanger citizens.
- **Clean Diesel Plan.** Special Act 05-7. This bill mandates that key state leaders develop a plan for significantly reducing diesel emissions. Diesel exhaust is a serious health threat.

James F. Spallone
State Representative
36th District



Please Keep in Touch

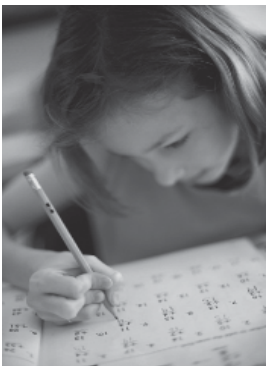
At the Capitol:
Legislative Office Building, Room 2023
Hartford, CT 06106-1591
1-800-842-8267 or (860) 240-8585

In the District:
P.O. Box 408
Essex, CT 06426
(860) 767-8615
e-mail: james.spallone@cga.ct.gov

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SCHOOL NUTRITION

You may have heard about Public Act 05-117 in the media. This was a bill that would have reduced the availability of sugary and salty “junk food” and sugary



soda drinks in schools. The bill also would have mandated 20 minutes of exercise per day in grades K-5. It would have been the strongest bill in the nation aimed at encouraging healthy eating and reducing childhood obesity. Those of us who were in school a decade or two ago will remember that soda was not available and recess was a given in elementary school.

The food and soda companies have aggressively marketed their products to school districts in more recent years. Governor Rell vetoed this bill, but work will likely continue in this area.

IF YOU WANT MORE INFORMATION . . .

Hundreds of bills are passed each session, and I can only cover some of the highlights here. If you are looking for information about bills not mentioned here, please call my office for a copy of:

- Senior Laws
- Education Laws
- Major Public Acts
- Laws Affecting Children
- Laws Affecting Business

You are welcome to call, write or e-mail me with any further questions.